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ABSTRACT

The University of Rhode Island's business Italian course is an advanced language course whose focus is the Italian business world and its reflection of values, customs, and traditions. The course begins with presentations on salient features of contemporary Italian, such as syntactical simplification and nominalization, and how the social, economic, and political situation influences Italian business. The remainder of the course consists of classroom lessons with assignments and activities, and visits to Italian-owned companies, the university library, and a state briefing center for prospective foreign investors. A typical class lesson includes brief thematic oral reports, lexical review, discussion of assigned readings, analysis of forms of business communication, background on the next topic, an assignment, and role-playing, listening comprehension exercises, a small group activity, and/or discussion of a relevant Italian short story, poem, or film. Readings are from current newspapers and magazines. Written work consists of preparation of summaries and comments on readings, invoices, budgets, evaluation forms, business letters, and a curriculum vitae. Guest speakers also visit. Students prepare final projects, and an overseas internship program has been established. Curriculum development plans include expansion of critical thinking exercises, more attention to the European Economic Community, and three related new courses. Contains 2 references. (MSE)

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757

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TEACHING BUSINESS ITALIAN

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Remo J. Trivelli

TEACHING BUSINESS ITALIAN

The course discussed in this article was first taught in 1981 under the terms of a grant to the University of Rhode Island from the U.S. Department of Education and has subsequently been offered every three years. One of the goals of the grant was to create undergraduate programs which would integrate foreign language learning and career-oriented studies such as business administration.

Italian 480, "Business Italian," like its counterparts in French and German at my university, is not primarily a business course but an advanced language course whose exclusive focus is the Italian business world. Consideration is given to the values, customs and traditions of Italy as reflected therein.

In preparing the syllabus for the course I am guided by the fact that the students will in all likelihood not find employment in Italy but that actually they may well have the opportunity to use the knowledge and skill acquired in the course if employed by an Italian company in the United States or possibly by an American company with affiliates in Italy.[1] (The matter of internships will be discussed later.) The fact that "Business Italian" has as a prerequisite one three-hundred level course, be it advanced language, literature or culture, provides the students with the linguistic preparation needed to be successful in it.[2]

759

As a background against which students may frame their efforts, the course opens with two complementary presentations, each about forty-five minutes in length. One treats the salient features of contemporary Italian, such as syntactical simplification and nominalization. The other provides an overview of how the social, econcomic and political situation influences Italian business in the post-industrial era.

The structure of the course consists of two general parts: the classroom lessons themselves with concomitant activities and assignments, and an itinerant part in which we visit Italian-owned companies in Rhode Island and related places of interest.

I.

Italian 480 meets for two and a half hours once a week.[3] A typical lesson is based on Elements 1 to 6 and on one or more of Elements 7 to 10 on a rotating basis.

Course Elements

1. brief oral reports on an aspect of the day's theme (insurance, banking trade, stock market, transportation, etc.) 30"
2. a review of the lexical items prepared for the day's lesson 10"
3. discussion of the readings assigned (usually two newspaper/magazine articles) 30"
4. analysis of some of the forms of

760

business communication 25"

5. a brief historical background of the theme of the subsequent lesson 15"
6. the assignment which derives from the sections on forms of communication and historical background 10"
7. role playing
8. listening comprehension
9. small group activity 30"
10. discussion of an Italian short story, painting or film which deals in some way with the world of business

The readings are taken from current numbers of newspapers such as Il Corriere della Sera, Il Messaggero, La Repubblica or La Stampa and from magazines such as Panorama, L'Espresso, Europeo, 200 (the Alitalia publication for its travellers) and Business: Idee Economia e Tecnologie Costume. These sources lend themselves because their articles on business are of general interest and not too technical in nature. More than half of the articles that I choose have an international dimension or treat an aspect of Italian-U.S. business relations. For students who may wish to read articles that are technically more ambitious I make available Il Sole-24 Ore and Il Mondo.

In addition to the summaries and comments that derive from the readings, written work consists of preparing invoices, budgets, and

evaluation forms to be used in hotels, restaurants and for various products (all based on authentic Italian examples). The students are also asked to write business letters[4] the purpose of which would be to inform, to request services, to lodge complaints and to persuade. Again, while keeping as close as possible to authentic language and forms, I direct part of the exercises for an audience that will consist of Italophones in the United States. At the end of the semester each student compiles a curriculum vitae based on an authentic Italian one. We then use it as the basis of a simulated job interview.

Guest speakers provide insight into the workings of Italian business and an appreciation of the cultural differences that a person encounters in commercial dealings with Italy. Recent speakers have included a former director of an Italian bank, the vice president of the U.S. office of a machine tool company and the proprietor of an import-export business. All accepted to speak willingly and afterwards extended their generosity by inviting students to contact them for further information and assistance.

II.

The itinerant part of the course consists of three kinds of visits. The first one takes us to the university's library for a ninety-minute session with one of the reference librarians in the social sciences. (I contact the same person each time because he is quite familiar with the content and scope of our course.) First, he gives an overview of the kinds of sources in both English and Italian

pertinent to the course. After a question and answer period, we visit the locations of the sources and the retrieval systems available. At the end of the visit each students receives a fifteen-page illustrated research guide which the librarian has compiled and continues to update specifically for our purposes. The library visit has become an integral part of the course; for example, students in preparing their final projects, make use of its resources and not infrequently consult with the reference librarian.

The second kind of visit is to the state's Briefing Center at the Providence Airport. Here representatives of the Rhode Island Department of Economic Development simulate for us the briefing and multimedia presentation intended for prospective foreign investors in the state. Although a part of this program is usually conducted in Italian, its value is such as not to be prejudiced by an occasional presentation in English. Included in the handouts is an illustrated perspectus in Italian on the desirability of conducting business in Rhode Island. Not only does it contain abundant information on the state, but it also lends itself to role playing exercises later in the semester.

Visits to Italian-owned companies constitute the third kind. These may include a manufacturer of athletic shoes, a food producer, a heavy tool plant and one that makes measuring instruments.

All three types of visit involve follow-up assignments which consist of the writing of a letter of appreciation, a description of the visit, a statement of what was learned or how the visit relates to the other parts of the course.

Each student prepares a final project in consultation with the instructor. Recent ones have dealt with the Italian wine industry, the structure of an Italian company, Milan as the economic capital of Italy, and the linguistic and cultural differences between the same advertisements in the United States and Italy. Most of the final class meeting is devoted to oral presentations based on the projects. After discussion of the presentations and a brief summary of the semester's work, the students are asked to evaluate the course.

The time and effort devoted to Italian 480 and its related activities has been more than rewarding. Not only does it satisfy a professional linguistic need of the students but it also allows them to view Italy from a perspective than can render their careers more fulfilling.

To enhance the learning opportunities beyond those of "Business Italian" itself, I have established[5] the first of an anticipated series of internships with companies in Italy. Under the present arrangement an engineering or business major spends with a permesso di soggiorno six months to a year with an engineering company in northern Italy for which he/she receives an adequate stipend. Knowing that certain students will not be able to intern in Italy, I am attempting to set up similar programs with Italian-owned compaines in southern New England. Should we decide to offer future internships under the University Year for Action program, students may earn academic credit in lieu of the stipend and very probably would receive a travel allotment from the host company.

764

Though more appropriate as the subject of another article, I would at least mention for those readers who are interested in thematic courses, that my interest in business Italian has led me to organize and direct a comparative literature course on the theme of business in literature. Participating faculty represented the following disciplines: Advertising, American Civilization, Business, English, French, Italian, Speech Communication, Sociology and Women's Studies. The non-faculty speakers discussed the managing of a large publishing house and the business aspects of a state university.

INNOVATIONS FOR THE 1990s

In light of the success of the "Business Italian" course I am considering certain changes that will allow the course to continue to evolve. Furthermore, because there is a good deal of interest in the growing centrality of business in society, I am preparing to propose the creation of three new, related courses.

One of the areas of modification in the present "Business Italian" course is to expand the exercises intended to develop critical thinking within the context of cross-cultural experiences. As Stephen Brookfield points out, "in workplace situations where democratic participation and worker control are the norm, the conditions for critical thinking are favorable."[6] In fact, several management concepts, among them innovation, flexibility and creativity draw on the very idea of critical thinking. Such characteristics are indicative of excellence in both the person and the company. Most of

765

the exercises would focus on a case method approach with real and simulated situations within the world of Italian business.

It seems clear that more attention will have to be given to Italy's role in the EEC. Topics we will consider are: Italy in the new corporate Europe, (Italy's) deficit problem, mutual funds and investing in Eastern Europe.

The three new courses which I am contemplating are related to the "Business Italian" course but in no way overlap with it. The first is a course in business Italian at the first semester level. The rationale in part is the growing interest in the topic among incoming freshmen who hope to major in some area of business. In planning such a course it is important to consider what kind of sequel can be offered so that the language component be consistent. The second course is one intended primarily to satisfy the identified language and cultural needs of those who work in the local Italian business community. What we hope to have is a tuition subsidy and incentives offered by the companies whose employees are registered in the course. Needless to say, the structure and goals would be determined once the students' needs are known. Finally, the third new course would be one in Italian civilization with emphasis on the links between business and several important aspects of Italian culture: government, the church, the arts, sports, trade and the history of cities such as Venice and Florence.

NOTES

1 Approximately twenty percent of the United States workforce is employed in the import export business.

2 I am in the process of drawing up guidelines for the goals of the course. The language in which they will be coached should reflect the several kinds of functions described in the body of this article.

3 A course at this level is usually scheduled for late afternoon to accomodate teachers in the area who may wish to register for it. Meeting when we do is also desirable because full-time students can make off-campus visits without having to miss other classes. Furthermore, company representatives who host us generally have more flexibility in their schedules late in the day than they do in the morning or early afternoon.

4 A useful text for this purpose if Joseph Harvard and M. M. Miletto, Bilingual Guide to Business; and; Professional Correspondence (Italian-English) NY: Pergamon Press, 1973.

5 My efforts in this regard have been supported by a development grant from the University of Rhode Island.

6 Stephen D. Brookfield, Developing Critical Thinking, Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1988), 137.